

EDITORIAL

Some thoughts about reviewing: An editor's and newcomer's perspective

CHARMINE HÄRTEL AND FELIX ARNDT*

UQ Business School, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, QLD, Australia; *HEC Lausanne, Faculty of Business & Economics, University of Lausanne, Switzerland

In this editorial, two perspectives on peer reviewing are presented. One from an Editor's desk, and the other through the eyes of a newcomer. In the latter, Felix Arndt shares how he first begin his journey as a reviewer as a PhD student and the lessons he has learned along the way.

AN EDITOR'S PERSPECTIVE ON REVIEWING

Peer reviewing is the lifeblood of academic journals. As a community of management scholars, we depend on the goodwill, impartiality and expertise of our colleagues to provide developmental feedback to improve the quality of research undertaken and ultimately published in our field.

High quality reviews accurately identify whether the contributions in a manuscript are novel or already well-established, as well as ensure important rigorous works are recognized even when they come from emerging or non-mainstream areas of the field. Reviews of this nature are the author's friend, helping improve the quality of one's theoretical argument, presentation of one's research, the veracity of conclusions drawn, and ultimately the regard of the work by practitioners and scholars alike.

Peer reviewing of course is not infallible. Throughout the history of science there have been notable instances where important pieces of work were rejected through the peer review process, and similarly where pieces of work published on the basis of peer reviews were subsequently discredited. Nonetheless, the contributions of a community of scholars is an important complement to the editor's role, without which due individual and timely attention could not be given to the volume and diversity of submissions a journal receives.

Editors typically identify reviewers by soliciting scholars and by unsolicited approaches from scholars. A track record in the field of the journal and commensurate with the standard of manuscripts

published in that journal is generally the main criterion for reviewer appointment. Reviewers who provide high quality and timely reviews are generally retained and often invited to join the journal's editorial board. Reviewers providing low quality reviews or persistently late reviews typically are dropped from the reviewer data base, irrespective of their standing in the field. These processes are followed to ensure high quality and timely reviews.

High quality reviews provide a clear statement of what the manuscript is apparently arguing and the key contributions it has to make to the extant literature, identify concrete ways in which the argument and methodology can be clarified and strengthened, as well as present an expert evaluation of the rigor and validity of the research design, analyses and conclusions. Reviewers also generally complete a rating form where they indicate to the editor whether they recommend the manuscript be published as is, provisionally accepted with minor revisions, offered a high risk revision opportunity, or rejected without further review.

For those wanting additional advice and ideas on writing a high quality review, I highly recommend the following website, which contains the tips and advice from editors from a wide range of journals in the field.

<http://omtweb.org/omt-blog/53-main/361-the-editors-speak-what-makes-a-good-review>

– Charmine Härtel, Acting Editor in Chief,
Journal of Management & Organization

A NEWCOMER'S PERSPECTIVE ON REVIEWING

My first impression of reviewing, when diving into the academic world, was that is like a distant star of the highest academic honors. Reviewing is one of the activities that seems to be even more surreal to a newcomer than getting their first accepted peer-reviewed journal publication,

which also never occurs for two-third of those PhD students who finally complete their degree. While I was inherently attracted and fascinated by any potential reviewing opportunity from the very beginning, I did not expect it to happen very soon and could initially only speculate about paths to become a reviewer.

With my first conference paper submission that was thankfully pushed by my supervisor only three months after the start of my PhD program somewhere on the way between London and Sydney, I was asked to review for the track I submitted to. Many of my fellow PhD students have shared this oftentimes challenging experience. Neither did I feel qualified for such a task, nor did I have a wide overview of the diverse topics within my field. Even more overwhelming was the experience, when I was additionally asked to review a couple of papers for another track outside of my 'three month expertise'. As a consequence, my first reviews took me several days each. I looked at related papers, read the primary references of the papers, read through the website of the Academy of Management (AOM) for 'first-time reviewers', and tried to evaluate the papers in terms of what I had learned. The evaluation of the potential contribution of the papers was particularly challenging. The fact that the references about reviewing were merely emphasizing the difficulty of the task, did not particularly help. Reflecting this theme were relevant papers about theoretical contributions (for example the recent *AMR* Special Issue on 'What constitutes a theoretical contribution?'), which only served to increase the vagueness of the concept rather than helping me to develop a clear understanding of how to evaluate the theoretical contribution of a paper. After several days of intense work for each paper, I finally submitted my reviews including my recommendations. To my surprise and maybe due to the fact that only two reviewers were consulted, the overlap between my recommendations and the track chair's decision was very satisfying.

Naïvely and curious to experience more, better and longer papers I subscribed to review for the Academy of Management Meeting, which seemed to be open for early PhD students on the one hand, while at the same time being a conference with an

excellent reputation for its reviews and recognition as a quality reviewing experience. When I finally received the papers, I was trembling before I opened them. I was aware that first time reviewers tend to get papers with a high likelihood of rejection. However, this is only true for journal reviews; for the Academy of Management Meeting, this is not necessarily the case since the allocation of papers appears to be done by keywords rather than reviewing experience. In my case, I received three very good papers of which two ended up in the Paper Presentation Session which is the highest available category at this conference.

While, this time, I no longer spent much time reading references of the papers, I read the paper submissions several times reflecting on a range of aspects and looking at related papers especially in terms of methodological issues. I was relieved when I realized that, despite the relatively mature developmental stage of the papers, that I felt confident my comments addressed valid points which, indeed, could significantly improve these papers. This hindsight came as a surprise since I was afraid to fail when providing suitable reviews at this level. However, it was the first time I felt comfortable with the thought to keep on accepting future reviewing assignments, since I noticed that my comments could make a contribution to the authors' work.

A couple of months after the submission of my reviews for the Academy of Management Meeting, and after the submission decisions were communicated, I had the chance to look at the other reviewers' comments and the evaluation of the reviews by the authors. It was only then when I realized that the authors also were able to evaluate the usefulness of the reviews. Looking into the AOM reviewing system, I was overwhelmed by two aspects: (1) Comparing my reviews to the other reviewers' comments confirmed my feeling that I was not completely off track with my recommendations to the authors. There was a complete overlap between my review and the other reviewers' comments in all major points and above 80% in additional minor aspects; (2) I felt deep satisfaction that all authors felt that my reviews were highly relevant for improving their work and at least equally important was their appreciation of the respectful and constructive

attitude that I took in expressing my reviews. Completely unexpected, almost breathtaking and a real crowning experience for a first year PhD, I received a best reviewer award from my AOM division. Interestingly, while this award motivated me to keep on reviewing, my satisfaction with the review process resulted more from the authors' satisfaction with my reviews.

Soon I realized the negative aspects of performing peer reviews frequently; it is highly time consuming which can be a real distraction from the core of the PhD project and it does not provide institutional recognition for a first promotion for a future academic job. I am not sure whether reviewing did not pay off for me in the beginning by providing the learning opportunity to broaden one's own horizon, areas of interest and range of approaches to an increasing variety of topics eventually making me a better scholar. Nonetheless, at a certain point, there is a decreasing slope of marginal returns from it; with the exception of the opportunity to review exceptionally good papers in one's own area of expertise and interest. Reviewing also gave me a feeling of belonging to the academic society. Being part of it is important, even though this opinion might not be shared by all academics I have met. Nevertheless, reviewing has helped me to develop my own writing skills and get connected to other people working in this area. It is one of the areas in which promotion standards may have reached a point that does not stimulate scientific progress anymore [for a reflection see Adler & Harzing, 2009 in *The Academy of Management Learning & Education* (AMLE)]. Subsequent to my conference experiences, I received more and more requests from journals; sometimes because I met the editor before, or because I submitted a paper to the journal. In one case – the most prestigious journal which approached me – I am still in doubt how the journal editor got my contact details.

Since I noticed that I was spending too much time on reviewing, I became selective in my efforts and rejected some of the reviews assigned to me, but decided to accept others depending on the journal. Unexpectedly, one journal offered me to join the editorial board after I submitted my third review to them due to – according to the editor – the high

quality and timely submissions of my reviews. I felt honored, but was also surprised about the relatively short time span I spent in academia, to receive such an offer. It is an extraordinary experience to have the chance to actively participate in the process of the publishing process, and more important knowledge shaping process. And it is a huge amount of work too. This part becomes especially tricky when one moves up into the list of emergency reviewers. Emergency reviews are normally urgent reviews in the case that an originally assigned reviewer could not perform his/her duty. Rare, but occasionally, they may also occur when both or all three assigned reviewers did not deliver convincing reviews or considerably diverge in opinion. While not always a pleasure, these jobs are crucial for the journal quality as they help us to provide timely decisions of high quality on manuscripts.

More than 100 manuscripts later, my time spent on one review has dropped drastically. Maybe because I developed a better knowledge of diverse literature streams and acquired more methodological knowledge, maybe because I have a better feeling on which parts of the paper I need to focus my comments, and certainly also because I have developed a small range of approaches for different kinds of reviews. This allows me to provide individual and developmental feedback to authors while at the same time satisfying the editor's information needs. A good review is a tailor made review for the authors, but at the same time for the editor. Maybe, there is another reason as well. Despite my efforts to explore the elements of a good review, reviewing does not appear to be an objective task anymore, even with or because of rising experience. This impression was confirmed when I joined an AOM research committee selecting the 'Best Paper' from a range of excellent papers. There is no clear better or worse. There is only one criterion that must be fulfilled: Reading with joy and passion with careful attention to academic standards.

– **Felix Arndt**, Board Member and Book Review Editor, *Journal of Management & Organization*

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